Yoma 39

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There are not many teachings from the Rabbis that are commonly used to support Christian claims about Jesus. There is, however, a passage in the Talmud Yoma 39b, that we see almost all the time:

"*The Rabbis taught, 'Forty years before the destruction of the temple… the tongue of gold did not become white*"

The following is an example of a question that revolves around this passage:

Question: From a purely Biblical standpoint, we can see -- even in the Talmud -- that G-d was not pleased with the Jewish practices of empty religion as opposed to a heart devoted to loving G-d the way He said to love Him. Specifically, the Talmud teaches that for the last 40 years of the Temple, G-d did not accept the Yom Kippur sacrifice that was supposed to atone for the sins of the nation.

Put on your thinking cap with me and do some math here. The Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. The Talmud records the historical account of FORTY (40) years of G-d not accepting the Yom Kippur sacrifice before the Temple's destruction and resulting diaspora. What kind of time-frame does that put on of the last time that G-d did accept the Yom Kippur sacrifice ? What event occured in that time-frame that could've possibly impacted the sacrifice for EVERY YEAR after ? Well, let's see… How about the fact that G-d sent His Son as an asham (sin offering -- Isaiah 53:10)?

There are two responses to the form of this question we can easily give:

1. The assumption that the year 30 CE is the date of the death of Jesus is just speculation. That is one possible date for this event, but others, like 33 CE, are just as likely which would make this association with Jesus non-existent. Before making an assertion like this it would be required to ***prove*** that Jesus died at any specific date.
2. We see that in the book of Acts, the disciples continued to use the temple. Obviously they felt it had some practical spiritual purpose that did not contradict their beliefs in Jesus.

I will ignore these issues here, because we do not need to rely on them as this passage is totally misunderstood, and misused by missionaries, and it is better to deal with these errors, than answer side issues, no matter how significant they are.

Before addressing the passage directly we should understand that the Talmud never says that the sacrifices were no longer accepted or effective at any time, it only relates that a red thread did not turn white. Specifically this is referring to the red thread placed on the horns of the goat sent into the wilderness as part of the Yom Kippur service.

What is interesting is that those bringing up this subject do not know that there were ***two*** threads, and that their use had nothing to do with atonement. On Yom Kippur the Torah states that two goats are to be taken, one for a sacrifice to purify the tabernacle and a second to be sent into the wilderness. Tradition required one thread placed on the horns of the goat sent to the wilderness, and a second was placed around the neck of a second goat to be sacrificed in the temple. The use of the thread was not a requirement from the Tenach at all. It was done for a very practical reason. Since two goats were chosen for that day, and they needed to be identical, in order to know which was chosen to be sent to the wilderness and which was to be used for a sacrifice in the temple, threads were placed on them. This way one could not be mixed with the other after the process of choosing which was to be used for what purpose had been decided. One red thread was placed around the throat of the goat to be sacrificed, to show that it was to be slaughtered. The other was placed in an obvious place, to show it was to be taken out to the wilderness. The changing colors, was a miracle and not a requirement of atonement, either Biblically or Rabbinically.

To fully understand what are the real issues here, let us look at what the Talmud says just before the passage in question. When this issue is discussed you will not see the full context of the Talmud passage quoted in its context. Here is what it says on page 39a:

"*Our Rabbis taught, 'During the forty years that Shimon HaTzaddik was Kohen Gadol the lot (for the scapegoat) always fell on the right side, from then on, sometimes on the right and sometimes on the left. The tongue of gold (a red string tied to the horns of the scapegoat) became white, from then on sometimes it became white and sometimes not. The western lamp remained lit (all night), from then on sometimes it remained lit and some times it went out. The fire on the alter burnt strong enough that the Priests did not have to bring wood except for the two required portions of wood in order to perform the mitzvah. From then on at times*

it was strong and times it was not, forcing the priests to bring wood the whole day long. There was a special blessing in the Omer offering, the two loaves of bread (for Shevous) and the (weekly) bread offerings so that any priest that received an olives worth was full. They would eat and leave over. From then on there was a curse in the omer, the two breads, and the bread offerings and the priests did not get even an olive so that the modest priests refused to partake of it."

To understand the teaching of the Rabbis we need to understand two things:

1. Who was Shimon HaTzaddik that there should be miracles like this in his time?
2. Why these miracles and why did they stop?

According to the first Mishnah in Avos, Shimon HaTzaddik was of the last of the Anshei Knesset HaGadolah, the Congress of religious leaders who were in Babylonia during the exile. As his name indicates he was known for his righteousness, and these miracles that occurred during his reign as High Priest are indicative of that.

However, he was an exception during the second temple period. In fact one of the main differences between the first and second temple period is that in the second temple the priesthood was totally corrupted for much of the time. Some well known examples of this that we find in the ancient Historical sources are:

1. The story of Chanukah shows a period when many Jews abandoned Torah and followed the Greek religion. This led to the temple itself being desecrated for a time, requiring a 'rededication'.
2. The Dead Sea Scrolls have diatribes against the wicked priesthood, and that community separated itself from the temple because of that.
3. Josephus tells us graphically about the evil of the house of the Hashmonians who where both priests and kings. He also tells us graphically about the immorality of Herod and the constant interference in the temple service by Rome.
4. The Talmud talks about the wickedness of the priestly class towards the end of the temple period.

Except for a short period of time at the beginning of the second temple period, we find that the picture was mixed. Some times better others worse, but in general after Shimon it was a time of decline.

When we look at these miracles we see every one of them has to do with the

priests and their temple service. When the priests were righteous and led by a righteous High Priest they merited to have miracles occur for them. But, as they failed to fulfill their duties righteously and properly, they failed to have miracles performed for them. They were no longer worthy of them. They occasionally were judged worthy of these miracles, but not continually as they were in the time of Shimon HaTzaddik.

With this we can understand the passage they quote, that appears after this one, which some missionaries have tried to distort:

"*The Rabbis taught, 'Forty years before the destruction of the temple the lot failed to come up on the right side, the tongue of gold did not become white, and the western light did not burn the whole night. The gates of the hechel opened by themselves until Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai rebuked them...*'"

We see that all the miracles stopped during this 40 year period. What is so important about these 40 years? If one looks at the historical sources, like Josephus, we see that by that time Jerusalem looked worse then any decadent modern city, with random acts of violence being common. Josephus describes the Sicarii, who used to mingle with the crowds and stab people with short knives killing them. Those behind the lawlessness were the priestly class who had close relations with the Roman overlords. Clearly no miracles could be performed for such people.

The end was sealed when the Sanhedrin could no longer keep up a facade of law and order under such circumstances. The Talmud relates in Avodah Zarah 8b 40 years before the destruction of the temple, they removed themselves from their usual place of judgment and stopped judging capitol cases. This was made necessary because the murders were so common, they could not control the situation. The wickedness of the priesthood and the ruling parties brought an end to the miracles that were common in the time of Shimon HaTzaddik.

There is a teaching of Rabbi Akiva in Pirkei Avos chapter 3 Mishnah 14, that explains what the talmud is trying to let us know:

Beloved is Israel that they are called sons of HaShem, a greater love is it that they were informed that they are called sons of HaShem...

Here we see that there are two separate issues: 1 HaShem has a certain relationship to Israel. 2. This relationship has been revealed. It is the same way with atonement. Yom Kippur brings atonement. But there were times during the

second temple period, when they were worthy to have it revealed to them by a miracle that they had received this atonement. Unfortunately, there were many when they were not worthy of this, and this is the point of the passage in the Talmud.

When one understands the truth, it seems ridiculous how missionaries can claim that this Rabbinic teaching has some relationship to the atoning power of the temple. This just indicates how little regard they have for the Rabbis, and how they wish to distort the simple meaning of their words.

Whether we have revealed to us or not, HaShem forgives us on Yom Kippur, then and now. It was His promise, unconditionally as it says in Leviticus 16:30: *"On this day atonement will be for you, to purify you of all your sins, before HaShem you shall be purified."* He does not lie. Contrary to what some missionaries intimate, HaShem is merciful and compassionate, and desires to forgive as it says in Psalm 78:38: *"He is compassionate and forgives sins and does not destroy."* This is given freely, and even to those unworthy of it, as it says in Exodus 33:19: *"I will show grace to whom I want to show and I will be compassionate on whom I want to be compassionate."*

All He desires is that we turn from our sins as we see in Ezekiel 18:23: *"Do I desire the death of the wicked? Says the Lord HaShem Is it not that he should return from his (evil) ways and live?"* And Ezekiel 18:32: "*For I have no desire in the death of he who should die, says the Lord HaShem, but that he should turn back to me and live.*" And Ezekiel 33:11: "*Say unto them, As I live, says the Lord HaShem, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live*" HaShem says explicitly that this is what he wants. Ezekiel 18 makes clear that no matter how much one has sinned and how long, he is forgiven by repentance. This was said by a prophet, Ezekiel, who lived in the exile when the temple no longer existed, just as it is today.

This same idea was already present in the prophet Isaiah 55:7: *"Let the wicked man give up his way (of sin) and the sinful man his thoughts and return to HaShem and He will have compassion on him, and to our G-d for he will greatly forgive him."* What does it mean by returning to Him? The prophet Hoshea says it explicitly in 14:2-3: *"Return Israel unto your G-d, HaShem for you have stumbled in your sins. Take with you words (prayer) and return to HaShem. Say to Him, 'Forgive all sins, and accept (our) good (deeds), and let the substitution of bulls be (the words of) our lips."*

There is an interesting custom in the Jewish prayers. We say in all three daily prayers a prayer for forgiveness of sin, in case we had sinned, and we strike our breast when saying this. However, on the evening prayer after Yom Kippur *we do not do this!* The reason is that since we have already been forgiven there is nothing to ask forgiveness for anymore. Those Jews who believe and trust in HaShem and his Torah *know* that their sins have been forgiven as He had promised.

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